

Coloured Houses: Transgressing the Limits of the Domestic Realm

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Abstract

It has long been argued that throughout nineteenth century England an emerging ideology of domesticity charged women with the responsibility for emotional and moral guidance within the home setting. The division of labour and rising cult of domesticity tended to place the interior within the realm of women, a territory they could claim as their own. Operating from what appear to be clearly demarked boundaries, gendered by social and cultural conventions, it has been suggested that women took on the private interior domestic arena and men sought refuge in the exterior – the ‘public’ face.

In 1873 Mary Eliza Haweis, a self-educated critic and arbiter of taste offered a challenge to this demarcation by laying claim to the house exterior and to the street. At the time she described her physical action, painting the exterior face of her drab London house a vibrant colour, as an ‘art protestation.’ This political action reflected a personal belief in individuality, and abhorrence of repressive ideologies.

This paper discusses her desire for liberation against the constraints of uniformity, and the reaction by the architectural establishment. It proposes that, diverted by the discussion of ‘outer colouring’ and polychromy, critics failed to notice that Haweis was operating across ‘spheres’ appropriating male terrain.

Introduction

In the latter half of the nineteenth century many married women struggled with domestic appearance, and sought guidance on decoration, furnishing, ornamentation and interior colouring from numerous women’s magazines and art journals including *Queen*, *Art Journal*, *Magazine of Art*, *Lady’s Realm*, *Young Woman*, and *Woman at Home*. Contributing writers both male and female ranged widely and provided both descriptive ‘elemental’ accounts of historical and fashionable interiors, as well as advice on how to furnish various domestic rooms. Some of the advice was from an ‘ideal’ perspective others were more ‘real,’ drawing from observations of existing exemplary work or recounting their own experiments. A number of books also appeared as the insatiable appetite for design advice on matters of taste and fashion grew. Some were commissioned others were drawn from serialised articles collected together – often with little elaboration. A number of these texts by, Agnes and Rhoda Garrett, Mary Haweis, Mrs Loftie, Mrs Panton, Lady Barker, Lucy Crane, Robert Edis, and Lucy Orrinsmith followed shortly after Charles Eastlake and Christopher Dresser’s overtly misogynistic volumes, in which they admonish ‘fair readers’ and ‘young ladies’ for their ignorance of taste.¹

The need for domestic design advice reflected a situation where a plethora of historical styles available for home furnishing and decorating created what Francis Collard calls a “state of cultural confusion [for] consumers and collectors.”² She notes that Mary Haweis in the *Art of Decoration* indicates the problems existence even among ‘cultivated’ consumers.³ ‘Ignorance’ was not confined to the lower or middle

classes. Grace Lees-Maffei suggests that advice writers presented domesticity as professionalized, valorising “homemaking to be as much a form of production as consumption.”⁴

Given that both sexes were interested in aesthetics, taste, art and architecture, Colin Cunningham suggests it is unclear and therefore difficult to comprehend that largely untrained and uneducated married women should somehow be better able to choose their surroundings.⁵ One possibility might be the prevalent contemporary understanding of society operating through separate ‘spheres’ in which women were identified with the private domestic realm and men with the public political sphere. Men found outlets in business, professions, and government etc., while the only expectation for many middle class women was to marry. Without access to the professional bodies many women offered design advice, particularly as writing was more easily mastered and became a necessary outlet for women intent on moving in other spheres.⁶ Exceptions included Agnes and Rhoda Garrett who pursued professional careers as interior designers, co-authoring *House Decoration* before moving more closer to the suffrage campaign, “their combination of interior decoration with votes for women was to be repeated a generation later by the Pankhurst sisters.”⁷ Mary Haweis’ career takes a more political position towards the end of her life, even though she continued to provide domestic design advice.

Much attention has recently been given by scholars to the widening of the gender gap in the nineteenth-century and the concept of separate spheres. Testing such constructions and questioning the stereotypes associated with Victorian domesticity is one concern of this paper. Another is to understand these writings and actions as part of the history of women’s empowerment. The vehicle for this discussion is a specific instance in which Mary Eliza Haweis challenges architecture’s conservatism and conventionalism as an artistic and political protest. Her action is to colour the outside of her house with oil paint.

Background

Mary Eliza Haweis was the eldest daughter of the fashionable painter Thomas Musgrove Joy and Eliza Spratt. As a daughter she received no formal education or training but “from her earliest childhood exhibited an extraordinary aptitude for writing and drawing.”⁸ This ‘natural’ talent enabled her to exhibit a painting at the Royal Academy when only sixteen. Married to the charismatic writer and preacher Rev Hugh Reginald Haweis she bore four children, one of whom died in infancy. Her distant and hostile relationship with her mother was often transferred onto her children, particularly Hugolin. Of the children Lionel (the eldest) ran a tea plantation in Ceylon before settling in Vancouver, Canada where he had some success as a photographer. Hugolin enjoyed acting and socialising remaining unmarried throughout her life, and Stephen, the youngest, moved to Paris to paint, marrying the poet Mina Loy with whom he had a son and daughter. After their divorce he settled in the Bahamas where he continued to paint and write with some success.

Mary Haweis published 11 books and is probably best known for the *Art of Beauty* (1877) and the *Art of Decoration* (1881), both of which offered advice and guidance on decorating the home and body whilst promoting her position on aesthetics and beauty. The latter differed from many of the descriptive volumes either illustrating good examples to follow, or advising through instruction. The *Art of Decoration* covers a wide range, situating the occupier in relation to surroundings, and providing historical and critical overview on rooms, as well as championing her own preferences and dislikes. It could be regarded as the first text to reveal the interior as a subject of separate study outside architecture. Other important works are *Chaucer for Children* (1877) and *Chaucer for Schools* (1881) both of which had several

editions, the latter reaching its 7th printing in 1935. Towards the end of her short life (1848-1898) she published the novel *A Flame of Fire* (1879) to vindicate the plight of womanhood. Following her death a number of her suffrage essays were edited by her husband and posthumously published under the title *Words to Women* (1900). With her husband's church income erratic, she supported herself through writing and book illustration taking every opportunity to earn an income. Writing profusely but always on her own terms, she refused to write about current fashions or 'popular' issues, but took up numerous causes and campaigns.

To date I have located over 100 of Haweis' articles collated from numerous magazines and journals, covering a wide variety of topics. Her output is consistent with Smith's position outlined in the *Gender of History* that "Women wrote endlessly, managed childbirths, families and political catastrophe while doing so, and haggled with publishers for terms."⁹ Noting that the 'amateur' predates the 'professional' she comments that material for their writing included an odd assortment of documents, repositories, and informants, which they tried to make vibrant. But Haweis broad interest in art and decoration was matched by meticulous research often conducted at the National Gallery, British Museum and the newly opened South Kensington Museum. Moreover as an 'amateur' woman writer her diverse outpourings may not necessarily signify an unfocussed approach to publishing, but indicate that she saw connections between all sides of a social and political issue, such that her apparent vacillations are simply proof of open-mindedness and tolerance. To some extent this more pluralistic and eclectic approach marks Haweis apart from the more didactic position of Eastlake. What matters is individual taste rather than a set of rules, "let us assert our individuality, if we have any, in dress as in other things."¹⁰ Ten years later in an interview with the *Women's Penny Paper*, she recounts a meeting with Dante Gabrielle Rossetti who "first showed me the way to freedom... [he] opened my eyes to the importance of freedom of opinion in art, and I quitted forthwith the older art-school in which I had been brought up, and struck out a line for myself."¹¹ It was a view reflective of an 'arts for arts sake' ideology. The freedom associated with this aesthetic theory allowed for personal expression and creativity, even if that act was still tempered by arts own code of morality and obligation. Mary Haweis understood this and realised that the artist was as Beardsley notes, "making an assertion of a new human right: the freedom of self-expression for the gifted individual who must express himself or perish."¹²

Fleshing the bones

In 1873 Hugh Reginald and Mary Eliza Haweis's had their Welbeck Street (London) house painted "moss-green, relieved by red and black in the reveals of the windows and balcony."¹³ Such an act would barely be noticed these days but in the early 1870s it surprised and shocked the public such that "little groups would collect and stare opposite as if expecting a raree-show to emerge."¹⁴ Almost simultaneously the fashionable painter Alma-Tadema also supported colours on the exterior to Townsend House, Regents Park. Mary Haweis asserts that in the years following her actions one or two neighbouring houses sported a little green and chocolate on their window sills and a second Welbeck Street house was painted red, with a sage-green door.

Further houses and their colourings are cited by Haweis including those of Lady Combermere and Lady Herbert of Lea, as well as a London hotel and the Athenaeum club. In the *Queen* article she comments how a skilful use of colour enlarges the apparent size of a window at Amber House opposite Lord's Cricket ground, whilst failing to mention that it was her current home – an omission that is remedied in *The Art of Decoration*, where it is referred to as "my own house"¹⁵

Mary Haweis initially argues rationally and practically for the outer colouring of houses based around the difficulty of navigating uniformly dismal featureless streets and squares. The addition of colour, she proposes, can enunciate good architectural work, "much to the relief of the maligned race of architects, and to short-sighted pedestrians."¹⁶ Inasmuch as the bright space of colour is much easier to locate than half obliterated lettering. A second need for colouring is because soot covering renders the existing stucco and creamy white paintwork black, with the subsequent loss of detail. At the time of writing London like Manchester was enveloped in a heavy carbon atmosphere brought about by domestic and industrial coal burning, a problem she also raised. The air was filled with soot particles and smuts (soot-flakes), which attach to brick and stone. The problem was so bad, even for the interior environment, that Haweis recommended fine muslin be placed over open windows to prevent smuts invading.¹⁷ Of the architecture by Inigo Jones, Chambers, the Adams' as well as many early nineteenth-century Greek revival buildings, she notes that their soot covered surfaces present a flatness and level tint. All projections which should catch light and cast shadows were generally obscured. Only occasionally when enough light penetrated the atmosphere could their sharp edges be discerned. For Haweis when depressing soot-blackened projections do not reveal their sharp edges, architecture does not come to the fore. Moreover she observes that recent understanding of Grecian architecture indicates that it had "colour in the streets."¹⁸ Earlier excavation studies and findings had informed these men (Jones, Chambers and Adam) but she states they had only seen the "bones without the flesh, the form without the life, they did not know then, as we do now, that the frieze of the Parthenon was a blaze of colour."¹⁹

A third reason for colouring outer surfaces concerns the detrimental effect of rain on stucco, causing intermittent greenness. Haweis declares that combined definite colours are obviously an improvement on this and "clean rather better than white... [and] are less trouble than pointing brick, and a good advertisement for the house painter."²⁰ The final part of the article concerns appropriateness of colour, in which she states that where heterogeneous architecture exists, heterogeneous colours are appropriate, but where there is uniformity such as in the Regent's Park Terraces, legislation will be needed to ensure they are coloured alike. Interestingly this proposition that heterogeneity and individuality must give way to visual coordination is a position occasionally undertaken by Haweis when co-ordinated beauty is necessary. In most of her writing she is an ardent supporter of individual expression, and the enhancement of personal beauty. She is to some extent against convention as an instrument of institutional control.

The Critics Respond

Mary Haweis is quick to point out that the critics most bitterly opposed to the vibrant colours soon become supporters when they appeared to 'tone down,' but she declares "the paint has not 'toned down,' there has not been time; but their eye has got 'toned up.'"²¹ Others such as Percy Vere (pun intended) writing in *The Queen*, tried to deflect the argument by suggesting that coloured houses are never seen abroad (which Haweis knew was incorrect as her own journeys to Europe testify), and colour should come from window boxes full of cultivated flowers and creepers. Certain that smoke and smuts do not kill plants and flowers she/he appeals to the reader not to spend money on "lapis-lazuli blue, Pompeian red, and gamboge paints, [but] to spend it on flower-boxes instead."²²

An unsigned article titled 'Unaesthetic London' also appeared in *The Queen* lamenting how the number of individual buildings erected without concern for neighbours creates a discordant arrangement.²³ That such actions should be controlled is clear in the article, but a far greater 'horror' is signalled – painting the

exterior in colours. The article suggests the original perpetrators were oilmen and lower class traders who painted their houses and thereby gained notoriety, one in which the painted patchwork house offers “an easy passport to ephemeral fame.”²⁴ Attempting to ridicule the ‘movement’ reference is made to a doctor who drove around town in a carriage drawn by two brightly painted horses – magenta and bright blue. Even for Haweis this is perhaps excessive, although she credits herself with starting the fashion for light coloured carriages as another way of brightening up the monotonous colouring of a dreary climate.²⁵

A follow-up editorial article also in *The Queen* printed extracts from a paper read by the architect J. P. Seddon before the Royal Institute of British Architects on the ‘*Polychromatic Decoration of Various Buildings*.’²⁶ Seddon like William Burgess was an ardent supporter of medievalism and the Gothic revival; in later life he attacked the ‘Queen Anneites’ with considerable bitterness. In this article John Seddon speaks in favour of polychromy based on construction materials because faded paintwork on Greek temples clearly indicates it is pointless to emulate something which has little durability. This Ruskinian understanding of ‘structural colours’ being the judge of architecture, relegates paint to the less climatically demanding interior. But Seddon praises some houses in the West End of London and Belgravia where Pompeian reds, blacks, browns and subdued yellows have been used noting, “this fashion, which is spreading, indicates that the old Puritanical fear of colour is waning.” Taking a practical approach to hues Seddon favours deeper tones as they last longer than lighter shades, and encourages the ground to be dark and orders light. He is critical of the practice of painting in one colour (red) and picking out the orders in black, a process that leaves integral architectural elements such as cornice and architrave in the ground colour. This he notes produces an effect that is ridiculous. Following these observations Seddon generously concludes that “these attempts are creditable, and the innovation a desirable one.” But his real concern is to make the polychromatic decoration permanent through the use of carefully chosen materials, and if colour is used it should be applied in an architectural rather than decorative manner.

The same article also summarises the architect Robert Edis from the second of his Cantor lectures on the ‘*Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*.’²⁷ Robert Edis a ‘Queen Anne’ advocate is like Haweis, cognoscente of the miserable appearance of London’s streets and squares, and argues that “we should endeavour to give some colour to the dingy streets, made more dingy by the smoke and other impurities of London atmosphere and fogs.” He contrasts the coloured decorations of houses in the Piazza delle Urbe, at Verona, with the dreary monotony of “imitation stone-colouring and sickly commonplaceness of Portland cement.” After chastising bad architectural design and the endless rows of faceless houses left grey in the shabbiness of Portland cement, he is certain that architects would welcome an association with the painter. But since London is not Italy he rejects the distemper decorations of the old Italian artists, in favour of paint on plain plaster walls. Edis is certain that among all good *architects* there is the desire to include the painter in their work, in a manner reminiscent of the art brotherhood. This way commonplace street architecture is made more pleasant as the monotonous lines of cornices are enlivened by a “judicious use of colour.” Like Haweis he suggests that architecture without colour is no more than a skeleton that needs to be, “brought into at least some semblance of pleasant life and colour.”

A C Meynell writing in *The Magazine of Art* on ‘*The Outer Colouring of Houses*’ is more critical and concerned to provide guidance on appropriate colours.²⁸ The main complaint being the fashion for painting houses, which was “introduced by one lady into the artistic and by another into the fashionable world.” One lady presumably is

Mary Haweis the other remains elusive. Meynell observes that despite the vast amount of advice that has recently been given on art decorations, and past principles that became dogma, many people now exert their own wilful private judgements on the subject. Such actions she/he notes offers a cheerfulness that is absent when the upholsterer furnished rooms and house builders painted in their own traditional manner. The vividness of these new individual expressions are bound to be noticed and shock or startle a population who had become accustomed to bad colour and decoration brought about by habitual inattention. Meynell's concern is that despite there being some excellent use of colour there must be some *rules* to prevent results which are grievous.

Meynell considers the practice of colouring questionable at best and an abomination at worst suggesting that "there must not be too much private judgement and private caprice in the matter of coloured houses."²⁹ Although against free expression, the author notes the habit of oil-painting houses must be tolerated, because many smooth surfaced buildings must be endured as they cannot be levelled. She/he commends the old Italian practice of staining and distempering walls in a range of dull reds, warm rose and yellow, and romanticises the fading colours and uneven crumbling stucco which over time charms the architecture. Given the prevalence of such examples Meynell is concerned that many contemporary Italian villas are now painted in a range of extraordinary cold and bright colours. But in a London climate where time is marked by soot and grime rather than sun-fading, decorators are condemned to use colours that have an appearance of newness. The article suggests a number of colours to avoid and also tends to favour red, yellow and sage green, the latter because "the colour that is so pleasant to live with in-doors [should] help to make our streets agreeable." Interestingly Haweis is certain that 16 Welbeck Street was painted moss green, but a hand written note by Lionel Haweis questions this adding that "our house was painted sage green."³⁰ It seems unlikely that someone as scholarly aware as Mary Haweis would confuse two colours as she had spent considerable time studying colour spectrums and pallets. Although Lionel was also a good colourist they had moved out of Welbeck Street in 1878 when he was only 8 years old, and could be mistaken.

Mrs Panton, *Suburban Residences and how to Circumvent Them*, 1896, "we cannot have too much real colour, and that far from demanding the timid compromises so dear to English folk, our climate and our atmosphere clamour for real sealing-wax reds, deep oranges, clear yellows and beautiful blues, and that nothing should make us temporise and have instead the smudgy terracottas, crude greens, ghastly lemons and dull greys and browns that are so liberally provided by the usual paper-hangers" a very modernist call for 'pure' colours.

Political colours

In this exchange all criticism and discussion tends to focus on the legitimacy or desirability of exterior polychromatic colouring whether applied as a finishing application or an integral component of building materials. The latter 'masculinization' of colour was generally supported by architects and architectural critics for its purity and naturalness. William Braham notes that Oscar Wilde also followed Ruskin's warning on exterior paint, arriving at the modernist operational principle that distinguished natural and applied colours. Haweis concern for rain degradation of rendered surface material, and the deteriorating effects of pollution is barely acknowledged, as is the problem of cleaning/repainting. Bright colours as a means of enlivening the city are supported but not held within the aesthetic/artistic position of the decorator – indeed they seem hostile. Colour is brought within the proper sphere of 'male' architecture as a natural material that conforms to the traditional tectonic reading of architecture as a structured set of parts. It is likely that Haweis is aware of

the debate surrounding polychromy having read numerous texts including Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, and Owen Jones *Grammar of Ornament*, and having studied colours on Egyptian antiquities in the British Museum.³¹

Importantly her position does not concern painting existing neo-classical works after the manner of the ancients, but is one of protestation, a revolt that is bent on reforming taste and appearance, as much as reforming the space of women. But her action, placing the vibrant colours of the interior on the outside surface, failed to be understood. It was judged against 'natural' colour, the prevailing hegemonic colour system promoted by architectural critics and the profession, rather than its symbolic power. Haweis's approach is however more interesting because her understanding and use of colour is based on the notion that "colours are beautiful because they recall nature," rather than being nature, or indeed natural.³² I suggest that in this case they recall not only nature but the space of women. Juliet Kinchin observes that the suffragette Francis Power Cobbe described the relationship of a woman to her home as 'calyx to flower, shell to mollusc,' concluding that "women, their clothes, their homes, their morality seemed to merge interchangeably with the natural."³³ This allusion of the 'protective' environment found in nature is based on wrapping or cocooning textiles, to mediate and refine the harshness of reality – the outside.

Haweis's action is to take a symbol of this controlled world and place it on the outside, thereby stretching the boundaries of the Victorian female body. Placed on the exterior, colour represents the domestic body. The relationship between the two and the projection of the self into surroundings was first voiced in the *Art of Beauty* and the *Art of Decoration*, where a series of statements tease out a relationship between the body, dress and surroundings. Beginning with the body, or rather the female body, as the site of beauty, clothes can be regarded as a projection of the self such that "Dress bears the same relation to the body as speech does to the brain; therefore dress may be called the speech of the body."³⁴ Furniture as the next level of projection again mirrors the self, "Furniture is a kind of dress, dress is a kind of furniture."³⁵ Surroundings, including the colouration and decoration of walls, must be "regarded as an accessory to the main object, the individual." Walls are intended to be a background or setting for occupants, and Haweis would have decorated her rooms with colours that worked best for herself, identifying with the room. Transposing these colours to the exterior identifies her (woman) with the outside. The domestic sphere is emblazoned on the outside, impressed upon the surface in a manner that predates the artist Marion Wallace Dunlop stamping part of the Bill of Rights on the walls of the House of Commons in 1909.³⁶ Admittedly there is no direct evidence to indicate that her action is anything more than the "the latest product of Art-Protestantism,"³⁷ but when seen in retrospect and in context of other actions and her latter claims for liberation, there is a reforming message that inadvertently cuts across both spheres. Although her action is intended to reform, it is also a stand against repression. She notes that London's streets and its inhabitants have become slaves of uniformity, because for many generations individual attempts at betterment have been repressed, "particularly in dress and decoration inside and outside the house."³⁸

These early actions and thoughts to reform the environment through art also have political implications, particularly in the hands of women. Where Haweis's earlier texts on Beauty and Decoration sought to influence rather than replace a failing doctrine on taste, her latter feminist writing sought to apply art on a grander scale, "in women's hands... lies the regeneration of the world."³⁹ In a less than innocent mode Haweis's action moves beyond the safety of the domestic and artistic sphere. She remarks that "To trifle with the surface of the wall seemed not only a dangerous solecism, but something like the defiance of the vestry, or even the Board of Works,"

a challenge that is as much political provocation as need for individual expression.⁴⁰ It is to some extent this action that far from corroborating the concept of separate spheres in which public and private are distinct, reinforces nineteenth-century feminist thinking in which they are inseparable from one another “the public was private the personal was political.”⁴¹

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- ¹⁵ Haweis, *The Art of Decoration*, p.390.
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- ¹⁷ Haweis, *The Art of Decoration*, p.358. Lady Barker also comments that bedroom walls get dirty very quickly if windows are kept open. Lady Barker, *The Bedroom and the Boudoir*, London, Macmillan, 1878 p.10-11
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